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When ISIS Families Come Home

Kazakhstan's efforts at rehabilitation and reintegration put Europe to shame.

By Adam O'Neal
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Sabinella Ayazbayeva has had a more eventful life than most young women from Kazakhstan. Born in 1990, she married at 19. She moved to Syria with her husband and children in 2014 and joined Islamic State. An airstrike made her a widow in 2017. She and her five kids eventually found themselves in al-Hol, a camp for families of ISIS fighters. After more than a year of uncertainty in the Syrian desert, they returned to Kazakhstan. She was 29.

"I want my children to forget about what happened," she told me through a translator on Zoom. "My life is going back to normal." For the 62,000 people languishing in al-Hol, life remains far from normal. Most are Iraqi or Syrian, but about 9,000 came from other countries.

The Syrian Democratic Forces run the 736-acre camp with limited resources. Brutal weather and squalid conditions can kill. And some guards enforce ISIS' interpretation of Islam: Dozens at this "mini-caliphate" have been murdered this year—with at least 10 beheaded.

The Trump administration oversaw the repatriation of more than two dozen American citizens. Some were fighters, but Washington also facilitated the return of

wives and children. This was America at its best: offering the children of terrorists a shot at a normal life while giving even the most repulsive citizens their day in court.

But the U.S. has struggled to persuade allies to follow suit. Thousands of European Union citizens joined ISIS. Many survivors are stuck in al-Hol, rejected by their home countries. After years of lecturing Americans about Guantanamo Bay, European leaders now look away as EU citizens are stuck in a Syrian Gitmo—albeit without the Caribbean prison’s amenities. The Biden administration is also pressing Europe. Its success has been limited.

“The girls wanted to go with us, but Kazakhstan couldn’t take the nationals of other countries,” Ms. Ayazbayeva says. “These girls were jealous.” Many in the camps have escaped. Some have returned to European countries like Belgium and the Netherlands, but no one can know exactly how many. Repatriation at least allows governments to keep track.

“Kazakhstan made a very bold move by being the first country to repatriate large numbers of its nationals,” Chris Harnisch, a Trump State Department official who worked on the issue, said in an interview. “They were not dipping their toe in the water. They went all in.” The Kazakh government repatriated 607 citizens through a program called Operation Zhusan. Most were women (157) and children (413). Thirty-seven adult male fighters faced prosecution upon arrival. Another 32 women and 89 children returned themselves.

The Kazakh government sends women and children to rehabilitation centers, where they undergo a long process to help them reintegrate into society. Some return completely jaded, while others remain committed to ISIS: One woman tried to smuggle the group’s propaganda into Kazakhstan in a child’s toy.

“We are trying to bring them back to normal,” then-Deputy Foreign Minister Yerzhan Ashikbayev told me earlier this year. “We would like to see them as ordinary people.” This created controversy domestically, but the government held firm.

“The U.S. devoted a lot of effort to helping the Kazakhs design, and build, and then implement their rehabilitation programs,” said Ambassador Nathan Sales, State Department counterterrorism coordinator under President Trump. The countries worked together to “build programs based on the state-of-the-art knowledge from fields like childhood trauma, from educational experts, from religious authorities.”

Bibigul Assylova, vice minister of education and science, said it could be hard to establish a rapport at first. When some children painted, “most of their pictures were about bombing.” But children “rehabilitate much faster,” and Ms. Assylova estimates more than half of the repatriated children attending school have become A students.

Mr. Sales noted that “so far, the indications are good,” but warned that the policy won’t succeed without sustained attention. Kazakh officials admit some participants of the rehabilitation program retain radical views. Mr. Ashikbayev said law enforcement can help mitigate risk but “we will not be probably at 100% success and we will definitely be having problems.”

Landlocked Kazakhstan, a former Soviet republic, is far from a human-rights paradise. Freedom House calls it a “consolidated authoritarian regime,” but on ISIS families Kazakhstan has taken a more humanitarian approach than many European democracies.

The country’s leaders see a bigger principle at stake. “It has to do with identity. Kazakhstan is a very young nation. We gained independence only 30 years ago,” Mr. Ashikbayev said. “This repatriation effort clearly demonstrates that we are not only a peaceful society but we would also like to preserve our identity as a state.”

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